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ABSTRACT

Though it may seem a stretch to connect the Middle Ages with a conference on composition concerned with "Literacies, Technologies, and Responsibilities," a medievalist notes that these three terms have been embedded in composition practices since the time certain religious groups broke from authoritarian tradition and tried to make privileged texts available to all. Throughout history, the mission to empower through the written word has been a task fraught with peril. An examination of the literacy habits of the Lollards, a heretical sect of the Middle Ages, provides a needed historical context for present concerns with literacy. Lollardy, unlike other popular medieval heresies, had its roots in the university and thus was a literate movement in its beginnings. It was inspired by the theologian John Wyclif. Wyclif's followers, the first-generation Lollards, were responsible for carrying Wyclif's ideas outside the university and translating the first English version of the Bible. The Lollard translation was extremely popular, despite the fact that to own such a bible was illegal. The authorities responsible for detecting and eradicating heresy were well aware of the threat of literacy among the people. As the persecutions of the Lollardy progressed, nearly any book written in English was taken to indicate heresy, even if it was perfectly orthodox. (TB)

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Literacy as Heresy: Lollards and the Spread of Literacy

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Though it may seem a stretch to connect the Middle Ages with a conference on composition concerned with "Literacies, Technologies, and Responsibilities," I, as a medievalist, feel that we should not lose sight of the fact that those three terms have been embedded in composition practices from the time certain religious groups broke from authoritarian tradition and tried to make privileged texts available to all. And, as happens time and time again today, the mission to empower through the written word is a task fraught with peril, especially when it is considered by those in power to be a subversive act. An examination of the literacy habits of the Lollards, a heretical sect of the Middle Ages, will, I hope, provide a needed historical context for our concern today with literacy, technology, and responsibility.

Almost inevitably in the course of writing about medieval heresy, both medieval writers and modern historians ask whether literacy leads to heresy. One reason for this question's prominence is that in a way, all Christian heresies are text-based: that is, they arise over differing interpretations of a written source, Scripture. An individual's reading of the Bible can lead that individual to interpret the text in a way different from the church's interpretation. It can thus lead to a

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spiritual awakening akin to the political awakening Paulo Freire describes among people in Brazil who have newly acquired literacy. Moreover, the heresy with perhaps the most permanent effect on the Catholic Church--the Protestant Reformation, which was, from a contemporary perspective, a heresy, as strange as that might seem to us--occurred soon after the invention of the printing press and depended upon that press for its success. Although earlier heresies did not have the advantages of printing, enough written sources survive to enable us to gain some understanding of the role of literacy in these movements. This is especially true of the late medieval English heresy called Lollardy because a significant corpus of writing about it both by the ecclesiastical officials charged with dealing with heresy and by the Lollards themselves exists. This paper looks at some of the literacy habits of the Lollards, arguing that the practices of Lollards set historical precedents for the integration of technology and literacy, the spread of literacy to marginalized groups and, consequently, the equation of literacy with subversive practices.

Before discussing the literacy habits of the Lollards, however, a few words about the movement's background are in order. Lollardy, unlike all other popular medieval heresies, had its roots in the university and thus was a literate movement in its beginnings. It was inspired though not actually founded by the Oxford theologian John Wyclif. Wyclif was born in c. 1334 and spent most of his life at Oxford University, first as a

student, then as a teacher. Although he did not begin his academic career as a heretic, his early denunciation of the corruption of the contemporary church lead him later in his career to argue that the church had lost its spiritual authority. Thus, he argued, rather than relying on the church for their salvation, Christians should instead read the Bible for themselves. As the Bible at this time was available only to clergy and only in the Latin version known as the Vulgate, Wyclif provided the inspiration for his followers' undertaking such a translation.

Wyclif's early disciples were university men like himself, and they held important contacts outside the university. In this way, these academic Lollards began to spread Wyclif's heretical positions among non-university people. These first-generation Lollards were responsible for carrying out the first translation of the entire Bible into English, a point to which I will later return. Gradually, the heresy was preached and spread among the classes beneath the high clergy and nobility: that is, among the lower clergy, business people, and artisans. And it was among these classes that Lollardy took root and spread. Although the exact beliefs held by any individual Lollard or group of Lollards varied somewhat, among the most common were the rejection of the following church doctrines and practices: transubstantiation, monastic and fraternal orders, oral confession, pilgrimage, the use of church music, and the veneration of images. In short, Lollards rejected much in the contemporary church that could not

be traced back to biblical authority. In the place of these devotions, the Lollards, like Wyclif, argued that all people should have direct knowledge of the Bible in their own language. Their entire religious lives centered on the reading, discussing, and preaching of Scripture. And this devotion to Scripture was the one aspect of the sect that did not change over time: the first Lollards of the 1380s were as devoted to reading the Bible as were the last Lollards of the 1530s.

This overview of Lollardy is necessarily sketchy, but I hope it adequately sets the stage for a more detailed look at the literacy habits of these heretics. The first major point I would like to make about Lollards and literacy is that the heresy took hold among classes where literacy was becoming important for the first time: that is, among those who might anachronistically be called the "middle class"--business people, artisans, and the like. Before the fourteenth century, these groups of people barely existed, as most people were engaged in sustenance agriculture. To run a business, however, unlike to engage in sustenance farming, some kind of literacy in English was necessary and schools began to crop up which trained people in the basic aspects of practical literacy. Thus, the early connections between technology and literacy are clear.

The first important Lollard use of this new literacy in the vernacular, one to which I alluded above, was the translation of the Latin Vulgate into the language of the laity, English. Groups of Lollards first undertook this task in the 1380s,

producing what is known as the Early Version of the English Bible. This Early Version was an extremely literal translation of the Vulgate--really no more than a trot--and was basically useless to anyone who did not already have at least some knowledge of Latin. Realizing this, the Lollards undertook a second, more idiomatic translation, what is known as the Later Version, which was completed sometime between 1395 and 1397 (Hudson 147). The very fact of these translations is remarkable. No translation of the entire Bible into English had ever been undertaken, in large part because the Church opposed it. At any rate, the Lollard translation was enormously popular, surviving either in whole or in part in over 250 manuscripts. This is a larger number of copies than is known for any other medieval text (Hudson 231). Its nearest rival (the Prick of Conscience) survives in 117 copies, the Canterbury Tales in only 64 (whole or part) (Hudson 231). This is an extraordinary number of manuscripts to survive when one considers that after 1401, it was illegal to possess an English Bible. Because the possession of an English Bible was considered to be indicative of heresy, many people must have voluntarily destroyed their copies to avoid being detected and burnt as heretics, and thus many more than the 250 copies that survive must originally have existed.

While biblical translation was by far the largest and most important project undertaken by the Lollards, these heretics did produce a significant corpus of other writings. For example, three sets of biblical commentaries survive: a commentary on the

Gospels, a commentary on the Psalms, and a commentary on the Apocalypse (this last work is in Latin). In addition, a large number of Lollard sermons survive, including a complete set of 294 sermons in English. This sermon cycle survives in its entirety or in significant portions in 31 manuscripts, a large number attesting to its popularity. In addition, the Lollards produced two collections of alphabetically arranged theological entries and a number of fictional works, most of which are satirical attacks on the corruption of the church. All of these works amount to an extremely large number of manuscripts to have survived from the Middle Ages. Even more remarkable is the fact that it must represent only a fraction of the Lollard books that originally existed. We know that many books were destroyed by the authorities and we can assume that many others were destroyed by their owners to avoid incriminating them.

Another important point to be made about these manuscripts is that they were expensive. Before the invention of the printing press, each copy of a book had to be individually copied, a very labor-intensive process which few people were equipped to undertake. Before the seventeenth century, writing was a completely separate skill from reading, and many fewer people could write than could read. In fact, writing was a technical skill that most people believed better left to the experts. Moreover, the materials necessary to produce a manuscript--the parchment and the ink, for example--were prohibitively expensive. Thus, large sums of money were

necessary to purchase a manuscript book. The fact that so many of these very expensive books exist attests to the importance the Lollards placed on owning and reading books.

Given that the average Lollard was not wealthy and that the average book was expensive, we might ask how at all Lollards were able to afford books. One way was by pooling their resources and purchasing books in common. As Anne Hudson notes, "Social insignificance, and even poverty, was evidently . . . no bar to Lollard access to books. A major factor in answering the practical problem of this access seems to have been group ownership. The records indicate the circulation of books; later investigations make it plainer that members of a group might contribute money towards a book or books, and that lending of books was so commonplace that it implies that the ownership was probably communal" (Hudson 205-6). Such communal ownership of books appears to be a Lollard innovation.

Sharing of books was facilitated, in fact, by the ways in which they were used. Rarely did an individual sit down and silently read a book. Reading in the Middle Ages was usually shared and oral, even in settings where most people could be presumed to be able to read. Further, we have much evidence that such oral recitation was the norm among the Lollards. One piece of evidence is the size of the surviving manuscripts, many of which are so large that they seem more likely to have been intended for reading aloud in a group than individually (Hudson 199). Moreover, we have more direct evidence than the size of

manuscripts that books were read aloud in groups. The Lollards, for example, were praised (by the 16th c. Protestant martyrologist John Foxe) for their "fervent zeal. . . sitting up all night in reading and hearing; also by their expenses and charges in buying of books in English, of whom some gave five marks, some more, some less, for a book: some gave a load of hay for a few chapters of St. James, or of St. Paul in English" (ital. mine; Foxe, Acts and Monuments, quoted in Aston 199). Here we have evidence both for the collective possession of books and for reading aloud.

A number of the sources describe even more specifically these reading groups, which they usually call conventicles or schools. These conventicles were meetings, usually held in the house of a believer and attended by members of the household, both family members and servants, in which a text, usually the Bible, was read aloud and discussed. An early fifteenth-century statute menacingly entitled De Heretico Comburendo, refers to such Lollard conventicles: "They make unlawful conventicles and confederacies, they hold and exercise schools, they make and write books, they do wickedly instruct and inform people" (quoted in Aston 198). Numerous other examples could be quoted from the episcopal records, and thus it is clear that the authorities considered these conventicles or schools worthy of their attention. One disadvantage of having nearly all of our knowledge of these conventicles come from the records of the prosecution is that we do not have detailed descriptions of

conventicles from someone who actually attended one. The records do make clear, however, that conventicles were educational in nature and hint in several places that it was in these groups that many heretics learned to read.

One aspect of these reading groups or conventicles that I have not yet discussed is who among the group members actually did the reading aloud. The records frequently mention the ability of one of the children or servants to read, which seems to imply that the parents or the head of the household could not (Hudson 136). Women and servants, in fact, appear to have attained literacy more often if they were in a Lollard circle than if they were not (Aston; Cross, passim). For example, women appear in prominent roles in one Lollard circle for which we have relatively detailed information, that of one Thomas Mone who lived in Suffolk in the 1420s and held schools in the cheesehouse chamber of his house. Thomas's wife Hawisia was an important organizer in the sect and was frequently in trouble with the authorities. Their daughter could read, and at least two of their servants were implicated in heresy. Speaking of Lollards more generally, Thomas Netter, a mendicant friar, inveighed against those "most foolish" Lollard women "who publicly read and taught in a congregation of men" (as quoted in Keen 295).

Thus far I have quickly surveyed some of the ways in which Lollards used their literacy and their books. It should be clear that writing and reading helped the Lollards to disseminate their heresy. Most earlier medieval heresies were spread by wandering

preachers, and Lollardy too employed this method. But Lollardy also used books to back up preaching. As Anne Hudson has noted, the Lollards understood that "the written word could stay when the persecuted preacher could not; a book is more easily hidden than a man; [and] the text is constant if not permanent, where the spoken word is fleeting" (Hudson in Biller 231). The Lollards also used texts to disseminate their views in more innovative ways. For example, they would interpolate perfectly orthodox texts with their own heretical ideas. In this way, they could reach people who might not initially be open to hearing their ideas. It is clear, then, that literacy contributed to the spread of Lollard heresy.

The authorities responsible for detecting and eradicating heresy were also aware of the advantages of writing in spreading heresy and thus worked hard to discover and destroy books, and thereby heresy. For example, in 1401 a statute made it illegal to own a copy of the Bible in English, unless one could prove that the translation predated Wyclif and that one had episcopal permission to own it. As the persecutions of Lollardy progressed, nearly any book written in English was taken to indicate heresy, even if it were perfectly orthodox. The Canterbury Tales, for example, is mentioned in more than one heresy trial. Moreover, knowledge of religious topics in the vernacular were taken as incriminating. This was the case because in the Middle Ages, people usually knew the Pater Noster, Ave Maria, and Creed in Latin. Knowledge of these elements of

the faith in English or the ability to recite from memory passages from the Bible was regarded as evidence of heresy. Usually the first time a heretic was caught, he or she was not punished by burning, but was required to abjure heresy and promise not to revert to his or her old ways. These old ways more often than not included books and group readings. Thus, for example, when in 1496 Thomas Maryet of Southwark admitted to having kept and read in his house "bookis, libellis, volumes, tretes and other workis wretyn in Englissh compiled by John Wyckliff, a dampned heretik," he had to promise not to resort or consent to read or hear such books, "nor to pryvate and dampned lecturus" (Hudson in Biller 228-29).

So closely, in fact, had knowledge of the elements of the faith in English come to signify Lollard heresy that one bishop charged with detecting and punishing heretics became himself accused of being a heretic because of his use of the vernacular. Bishop Reginald Pecock was convinced that the only way to reconvert Lollards to orthodoxy was to speak to them on their own terms, specifically by refuting their positions and asserting orthodox ones through the use of the vernacular. He thus put orthodox doctrine into written English. His efforts earned him the same end as many of the Lollards he was charged with detecting and punishing. He was accused and tried as a heretic, found guilty, and forced to abjure, and his writings were publicly burned in a bonfire at Paul's Cross in London (in 1457).

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